

Appropriations Committee
Public Hearing on Governor's Proposed Budget
Human Services

March 4th, 2011

Madam Chair(s) and members of the committee:

I am attorney Barbara Aaron, a partner in the law firm of Berman, Bourns, Aaron and Dembo. My practice is in matrimonial and family law, and I specialize in alternative dispute resolution including mediation, and collaborative divorce. I have been an active member of the board of directors of the Children's Law Center of Connecticut since 2005.

I choose to devote my time and efforts to this organization because of my deep commitment to families and children, particularly those who are most vulnerable and have limited resources. The Children's Law Center serves poor children in high-conflict divorce and custody cases. These children deserve to have their needs represented and their voices heard. Children whose parents are experiencing divorce or separation are vulnerable and powerless, and the potential for permanent harm to them - both emotionally and psychologically - is real and profound. That harm has a lasting impact on them as individuals, as productive members of society and as the parents they will likely become. It is critical that the state, in the role of *parens patriae*, do everything possible to ensure that these most vulnerable and valuable citizens are protected and have a voice through the work of the Children's Law Center. It is incumbent upon you, as law makers, to take responsibility for serving these children. As a member of the board of this organization, I am humbled and grateful for the support the legislature has shown for our work by including Children's Law Center in the state budget. I appreciate your and the governor's recognition of the importance of advocating for these very vulnerable citizens.

Children in family court are historically an under served population. An estimated 14,000 divorces occur in Connecticut every year. Children whose parents are divorcing often suffer from depression, sleep disorders, and loss of self-esteem. Children who live apart from one of their parents are more likely to drop out of school and have a child before reaching the age of 20 than those who live with both parents. The longer parental conflict continues, the more serious the psychological damage to the child. By mitigating parental conflict early and efficiently, and by helping to craft parenting agreements that serve the best interests of the children, the Children's Law Center helps protect their young clients from the long-term damage that can result from intractable parental conflict.

Additionally, this important work saves the state time and money. I know first hand how costly it can become when parents are determined to be ruled by their differences and emotions. I have

seen the billable hours add up in my own practice. I understand the essential nature of crafting agreements that will stand up over time, so we don't clog the court system by revisiting these cases, time and again. The cost of representing a family without this essential service would surely be far greater, in dollars, time and negative social impact.

With deep appreciation for the governor's proposed Prevention Budget, I urge you to pass this budget and include funding for the Children's Law Center in its full contractual amount of \$150,000. Attached to this testimony is a copy of the budget and organization's line-item funding.

Thank you.